

2008: A Rock Morality Musical

By BARBARA DELATINER

New York Times (1857-Current file); Mar 28, 1976; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times
pg. 373

2008: A Rock Morality Musical

By BARBARA DELATINER

WHEN it comes to odd quartets, the team responsible for "The Zinger," a musical in its world premier run at the PAF Playhouse in Huntington Station, is remarkable even for show business.

Harry Chapin, lyricist and co-author of the book, is the million - record - selling pop singer. Sandy, his wife and writing colleague, is a candidate for a Ph.D. in esthetics. Brother Jonathan, the director and third collaborator, is a Franciscan monk. Stephen Chapin, the composer and Harry's younger brother, is an electrical engineer who cannot resist the family's call to music.

Brought together, these various sensibilities and talents produced a futuristic morality play that uses music—the kind that comes out of electronic synthesizers—as the environment for an examination of man's incessant pursuit of power.

Set in an electronic recording studio in the year 2008, the play unfolds on two levels. On one, the audience is asked to participate as guinea pigs whose reactions, "recorded by squirm, cough and boredom factors built into their seats," ostensibly will make or break the new music and singers that have been tape-recorded and then



The New York Times/Fred R. Conrad

Harry and Sandy Chapin at the PAF Playhouse, Huntington

delicately amplified by intricate machinery.

"That's not even so futuristic," Harry Chapin said. "The TV networks are doing that today—not just with possible programs, but even with three-line descriptions of possible programs to see what newspaper or magazine listings can capture a potential viewer's interest."

The music, though, is secondary to the onstage drama,

which involves a fading producer's battle to retain control of his medium of expression in the face of strict governmental control. Brother Jonathan explained that the plot "looks at the music industry as a tool of power."

"The play is set in the future," he said, "because it is a valid way of approaching something of political intent. Taking it out of your time

and place allows for objectivity and lets one explore a subject without becoming emotionally involved with the political forces that exist today, without requiring the audience to play guessing games to identify names and faces.

"It is built on the premise that nothing changes in terms of human nature and a man's attempts to deal with

his environment and political struggles."

The show's creators are also banking on the premise that if human nature remains the same, man's environment will not change too radically in 30 years. They have tried to keep the "Star Trek" ingredients to a minimum, notwithstanding the "other-world" quality of the music and the mechanical ambience of the stage—a giant computer controlled by a director riding on a dial-filled cart.

"The future won't look so different," insisted Brother Jonathan, who also designed the set.

"And who's to say that some things we have today won't be kept," Harry Chapin pointed out.

Along these lines, a screen used for a backdrop is decorated with a peacock design painted originally by James McNeil Whistler in the 19th century for a London house.

"I saw that years ago at the Smithsonian," said Brother Jonathan, who was a painter before he turned to the theater to become, as the founder of the Everyman Company, one of the foremost exponents of street theater. "I guess I just tucked it away for future use. The time has come."

Brother Jonathan, a "believer in popular theater," has also brought to the production some techniques that he has used successfully in

Cont'd on Following Page

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.



THE NEW YORK TIMES/FRED R. CONRAD

Jay Broad, 'Zinger's' director, watching Camille perform from sound booth offstage

the street theater. He has insisted that he, his co-authors and his actors "make what we think and feel crystal-clear." Subtlety has its limitations on the street, he said, when one aims to "illuminate our time."

"There is nothing arty about Jonathan and the people he uses," Mr. Chapin said. "They are all used to working with a can-do, solve-it mentality that comes directly from street theater."

In dealing with his actors, Brother Jonathan has strived for an ensemble approach, trying to "make them physically aware of each other and creating for them a secure environment where they can work."

This has appealed to some members of the cast. Dana Gladstone, who was on Broadway in "The Great White Hope" and plays an insecure emcee, found rewards in Brother Jonathan's ability to "make each actor feel he has been hired for his unique ability."

"We are having a beautiful time, learning to love each other," Mr. Gladstone said. "I guess his own life as a priest has influenced him. At his best he is dynamite, terribly exciting."

On the other hand, Beverly D'Angelo, who recently appeared on Broadway in "Rockabye Hamlet" and

plays a rather unsympathetic ingenue in "The Zinger," is a product of a more formal theatrical training in Canada and said she has had difficulty. "We have been so rushed for time," she said, "with so much rewriting going on that the actors really haven't had much opportunity to concentrate on performing. Much more is left up to us and we have been creating almost as much as the writer and director. That's brand new for me."

In the works for less than a year, "The Zinger" (a futuristic device around which the plot turns, or as Harry Chapin put it, "man's key to freedom.") grew out of his dissatisfaction with his first, abortive contact with the stage: "The Night That Made America Famous," a multimedia musical that lasted several weeks on Broadway last season.

"I wanted to do something else right away, using what I had learned from that experience," Mr. Chapin said. "The first time around I think I was awed by working on Broadway and never took advantage of my own potential, my own instincts."

"I came away from that with several ideas. I wanted to do a book musical, but not one in which all of a sudden a character breaks away from the action and starts

singing. And I wanted the sound quality to be unlike anything heard previously in a theater."

"You know, you usually hear sound systems pushed to their utmost. Our system here— it's my own sound system that I've lent the theater and the music is put down on 16-track tape with the performers singing to the tapes as they would in a recording studio—could literally hurt people's ears if we pushed it all the way. We won't, although we will turn it up for younger audiences. They like louder volume."

Mr. Chapin mentioned this concept to Jay Broad, the playhouse's new director, when he arrived on the scene a year ago, and he put it down on the schedule.

A chance meeting between Mr. Broad and Brother Jonathan made it a three-way collaboration. In between projects in Brooklyn Heights, where he is usually based, Brother Jonathan—who is temporarily living at St. Anthony's High School in Smithtown, where he used to teach— "asked Jay if there was something I could do for PAF while I was out on Long Island. The something turned out to be this idea Sandy and Harry were working on and once we sized each other up, realized we could work

together, we decided to go ahead."

"It's been terribly exciting and surprising. Most American playwrights, you know, work alone. Here, we have learned to work together, got the right chemistry right away and have grown, developed."

"Then, it is marvelous working out of PAF. Since we are so close to New York we can collect the skills you couldn't get at more distant regional theaters. Here the people can work commuting to the theater without wrecking their New York careers."

This proximity has resulted in a cast of eight drawn heavily from the New York theater and television (for example, P. J. Benjamin and Ben Vereen appear in "Pippin," and Anthony Call is a regular on "The Guiding Light" and "The Edge of Night"), a choreographer, Haila Straus, has worked at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Lincoln Center, and a costume designer, Jania Szaranski, is lately of the Long Wharf Theater in Connecticut.

Using the four-week run through April 17 to study and improve the show (the company only rehearsed for four frantic weeks), its creators hope "The Zinger" will go on to other regional theaters and eventually to

Broadway.

Besides the customary pressures, Mr. Chapin feels another that is connected with the outcome of the project. He is chairman of the board of the Performing Arts Foundation, the theater's parent organization, and dreads the thought, as he put it, of "having to go to his fellow trustees and say, 'Sorry I blew it. We threw away the \$80,000 it cost to produce.'"

Although he feels somewhat "embarrassed doing a show here" because of his foundation role, his fears have been minimized by an advance sale in which most of the run was sold out before it even opened. PAF will get a percentage of the show if it goes on to becoming a money-maker.

"I hope this will be a source of revenue for the theater," Mr. Chapin said. "What we are doing here with originals is so important, especially as other regional theaters pull out of originals and go more heavily into revivals. Here, we are giving theater people a shot at getting their work produced professionally without all the hassles of Broadway."

"And to me, that's important, being around at the birth of something. Just think what it would have been like to have seen the first night of 'Oklahoma' or 'Hair'?" ■